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PATRIOTISM AND ITS PRAISE

BY FLORENCE MARY BENNETT

THERE is a delightful little volume in green leather and gilt tooling, to be encountered now and then unexpectedly in homes to which one would scarcely have guessed that such literary gleanings travel: *Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology*, it is called, and the translator is that master of exquisite English prose cadence, Mr. Mackail, known no less for his classical learning than for his critical writings on modern poets, his name being associated in many minds particularly with thought of William Morris and Walt Whitman. Life and death and love, fate, literature, beauty, aspiration and worship—with such things the ancient *Anthology* has to do, in its meditations, its gleams of intuition, its poignant divinations concerning *homo* and the *humanum*. As one turns the pages, one chances on bits oddly familiar and on others curiously alien from the ideas of our time and place. To those that savor of the familiar one is prone to revert, and then, suddenly it may be, he understands that these ideas were somehow long ago wrought into the fabric of his own mind. These are the grand eulogies on patriots that have come ringing down through the ages, out of the Greek store-house. Here in various beautiful phrases, incomparably melodious in the fair Greek tongue, is to be found adequate praise of valor and the valorous. “Dying, they are not dead”—what a paean!—“since Valor from the Heavens, adorning them, leads them up out of the House of Hades.” We are told that “they have fashioned for their fatherland quenchless glory, in having wrapped about themselves the blue-black cloud of death.” Estimate of the cost is not avoided, but no less resonant is the affirmation that the thing purchased is a priceless good. “We lost lovely youth, in that we welcomed to ourselves the shaggy cloud of war.”

Those who lie low in death are men who "wished to leave for their children a city flowering with freedom, and willed themselves to die in the front ranks." There is this cry from the tomb: "If to die bravely is the best part of Valor, then did Fortune allot this boon to us. For hastening to set the crown of freedom on Hellas, we lie adorned with ageless praise." "'Tis excellent for a good man to die, falling amid the front fighters, spending himself for his country." Horace and Cicero and Vergil moulded the Latin tongue to these utterances, and it is through their voicings probably, rather than from the more beautiful Greek, that most men have caught the ancient encomia on courage. Often, whether in Latin or in English, their phrases have been appropriated to the honoring of our nation's dead. *Dulce et decorum est!*—the words fairly say themselves, however unpopular be the study of Latin! "These be those few whom shining Valor carried to the sky!" "Oh, happy death, a debt owed to nature, best paid for country's sake!" The Roman word for manly courage has become ours for broader definition, *virtue*.

In the perplexities that beset our generation and our nation, men might well cry aloud a desire to return to the pagan days when there were no debates about the right or wrong of war. Arguments, of course, there were about the righteousness or unrighteousness of a specific war, contemplated or undertaken, but the modern mind can hardly fancy a Greek philosopher—Socrates, Plato, Epictetus, or any other—asserting uncompromisingly that all war is wrong and counselling non-resistance. Socrates actually performed arduous military service for Athens, showing himself a practical, courageous, and uncommonly cool soldier; the laws of Plato's Utopia require the philosopher-kings to serve the State in peace and in war and approve the idea of arming for the nation the women as well as the men; and, indeed, the history of the ancient Greek states makes it apparent that as a controlling principle of government there was always the assumption that the citizen's duty to the polity transcended all his obligations and pleasures as an individual. As to Rome, the name is to most men the synonym of war. It would seem that, by taking war for granted, by inculcating in boys a thirst for martial fame and a firm idea of obedience to country, these pagans saved themselves a multitude of unhappy heart-searchings, whereas for us, the teachings of Christianity,—regardless of the

greater or less attention that we give individually to the precepts of this or that organized Church of Christendom,—have propounded, to our distress, scrupulous questionings of mind and heart. The Gospel records that the Jews, debating what should be the fate of Jesus of Nazareth, were swayed by this reasoning: “If we let Him alone, all men will believe on Him, and the Romans shall come and take away our place and nation.” Their feeling was that this Christ, Who had called the dead to life, the spiritually torpid to spiritual achievement, Who preached a coming era of righteousness, love, and peace, Who directed men to become citizens of a Heavenly Kingdom, that rested on sanctions more august than those of human fatherland, challenged themselves as lovers of their nation, challenged the very thought of national solidarity and patriotism, and they shouted, “Crucify Him!”—lest He gain the belief of the people, and win them away from lifting the sword against the Romans, and there be no Jerusalem.

It may lead the mind on to understand in some measure the hatred manifested by the Roman state toward the humble sect of early Christians. To a proconsul of the Empire, jealous for the prerogatives of himself and his City, it was obnoxious to hear that a small religious band within his jurisdiction was acknowledging a King other than Caesar; and as the new belief spread even in Rome itself, there grew up among magistrates a dread of it, as of a philosophy admittedly subversive of government. The test described by Pliny in the famous letter to Trajan as that by which he detected the “miscreants” who adhered to the “superstition,” consisted in the requirement that the suspected persons pay ritual homage to certain images of the gods, and also to a likeness of the Emperor, with offerings of incense and wine. And yet, as a rule, to a Roman governor it was a matter of indifference to examine into men’s tenets of faith, Rome being proverbially hospitable in welcoming alien cults. In the cult of Christ, however, there was recognized an enemy to Roman power, an anti-national, a radically anarchical tendency. Thus against the Christians even the exemplary Marcus Aurelius was moved to issue a bloody edict. One discerns the other side of the situation in the epistolary writings of the New Testament. Might a Christian eat flesh that had been offered to idols? Might a Christian marry an unbeliever? Must a Christian obey the

civil magistrates of his district? The pity of it, that their opponents could not have read the clear apostolic rulings, enjoining conformity to the customs of the land, provided that conscience suffered no whit, and, above all, complete submission to temporal authority, as to a visible instrument of God's power! The Gospel too has its narrative of the penny and its superscription, as well as of the tribute-money paid by the Master and Peter.

Not only the memories of early persecution, but also the cruel experiences brought to civilization by the barbarian incursions, led Christian people to stress the thought that they were separate from the "world," that their hopes should centre on the City in the Heavens, "not made with hands," where their names might perchance be written. But the complex process which evolved the Middle Ages developed a new Christian. That this great "Middle" period in European history was characteristically blithe is an opinion that scholars have seriously impugned, but, however gloomy the theology and psychology of the time, there is undeniably something debonair in its romantic disposition to mingle in an incredible *satura* all that had ever been heard of on this earth. The soldier of Christian chivalry might well be chosen as symbol of the re-fashioning of life and thought. Fancy the echoing shouts of crusaders struggling in bloody battle to win back the sepulchre of the Man Who, in the shadows of Gethsemane, bade His followers make no resistance to those who had come out with swords and staves to take Him!

It is a noteworthy fact that the Old Testament is not very fertile in thrilling memorable lines to the honor of valorous patriotism. Luridly vindictive the language of the older Scriptures often is. One might question whether there are more terrible words in literature than those which terminate that exquisite lyric of the exiles' longing for their native land, *By the Waters of Babylon*. The grand story of the Chosen People has frequently its shouts of triumph, the gloating over the slain and spoiled Egyptians,—a recurrent strain in chronicle, psalm, and prophecy,—the hymn of Deborah, or of Jael, the army's praise of Saul, or David, for the thousands, or the tens of thousands dead on the field. Puritanism, searching for mottoes of denunciatory hatred of its Zion's foes, or the Inquisition, probing for sanction to its black deeds, revelled in the Stygian passages of Holy Writ. The issues between the Jews and their enemies had

always a religious coloring. Their very state rested on the idea of the complete exclusion of foreigners,—even more than that in the older days, on the thought that no pact was to be made with Canaan, that rather, root and branch, the peoples encircling Israel were to be hacked down in war by God's people. Out of this passionate religion came the Book that speaks in poetic utterances, as no other book, the language of every man's aspiration and worship; but the patriotism of the Bible is too crude, narrow, and bloody to lift the reader to the ideal realms.

The patriotic expressions of Hellenism, on the contrary, serve America no less aptly than the small city-states for whom they were originally composed. They abstract, after the clear Greek manner, the principle; and the epitaph on a band of warriors who perished, it may be, in an obscure ancient struggle, appropriately marks the grave of a soldier of the Northern or the Southern ranks in our Civil War, or one last week interred in France.

There is in our country no sight more impressive than that vaulted passage-way of Memorial Hall at Harvard,—the very chamber of commemoration,—where, above the plain tablets inscribed with the names of the University's children who fell in the Civil War, are written the sonorous praises of patriotic valor in general. To the appeal contribute various elements of poetic suggestion, chief among them, doubtless, the simplest—the pathos revealed to the first glance wherein the observer recognizes how young were most of those recorded here, how again and again the year of death antedates that of the college Commencement destined never to come. The contrast is at once patent between the feast of life, hardly yet spread on the board, and the darkness into which they early entered, as their portion appointed in place of joy. As gallantly as a man's spirit allows, he may hold himself prepared, like the "chief poet on the Tiber-side," when his time shall come, to rise from the feast with a smile, and unregretful; but none can, while himself in full possession of the enjoyment of living, read stolidly a tale of brave young Barmecides at life's feast. Even the cynic, with words ready-winged to show that this banquet were after all sweeter untasted, has no heart to speak hereanent, unless it be a "Ducdame" which points the finger to the generous fool in his own breast. A battle-field cemetery, stiffly horrid with its rows of little stones,

ten thousand, fifteen thousand, twenty thousand—our land holds these dreadful planted grounds!—tells mainly of the waste of life, against which the heart protests in wrathful sorrow; but those soberly set tablets in Memorial Hall, austere instructive, each giving only name and year and fatal battle, convey somehow, with their message, a reason for the outpouring of life, a hint of compensating values. One has the Latin poet's glimpse of "Valor opening for those who deserved not death the forbidden way through the Heavens." It is discernible that a fiery choice was made. To have chosen the hard lot and resolutely to have abided by the decision, even to death—such is the glory revealed in these monuments, and such consecration later years give to both sides of these bloody crises. The poet Aeschylus, sailor-soldier of Salamis, hinted in one of his tragedies Persia's side of the story; the Greek Euripides, no less than the Italian Vergil, gave the anti-Greek view of Troy's fall; and the grandson of the hottest abolitionist of Boston town thrills to the window in a church in Richmond in honor of the man "who counted it nothing to be reckoned the son of Pharaoh's daughter, but chose rather to be numbered with his own people." Harvard wrote her epitaphs in simple English, but, for the adorning scrolls on the walls above the tablets, she selected the majestic language of academic learning, as if to say that when she gave her praise, she must speak in Latin. She commends in Cicero's and Horace's echoes of the Greek Anthology.

To assert the popular antithesis between Christian and pagan philosophy regarding war in such a way as to suggest that pagan folk thought with no compunction of the havoc of armed conflict, would display ignorance of some of the noblest passages in the older literature of Europe. The Christian, on the one hand, devised a way of accommodating his theories of non-resistance to his spirit of patriotism, and the Greek, on the other, despite his readiness to maintain that martial discipline was a suitable training for manhood, was not without eloquent words in scathing arraignment of war.

One might read certain memorable lines from Euripides, which the English poet, Gilbert Murray, thus translates:

Oh, it were well
The death men shout for could stand visible
Above the urns! And never Greece had reeled

Blood-red to ruin o'er many a stricken field.
 Great Heaven, set both out plain and all can tell
 The False word from the True, and Ill from Well,
 And how much Peace is better! Dear is Peace
 To every Muse; she walks her ways and sees
 No haunting spirit of Judgment. Glad is she
 With noise of happy children, running free
 With corn and oil. And we, so vile we are,
 Forget, and cast her off, and call for War,
 City on city, man on man, to break
 Weak things to obey us for our greatness' sake!

The Greek felt keenly, as his expression of self in the arts testifies, the sadness of the world, the bite of life's irony. Whither the paths of glory lead, he knew as well as the English elegist, and he declared his thought. But it was always his counsel to be gallant, self-poised, controlled by reason.

We are heirs of it all, as much as the wreck of the past has left,—Hellenism, the Old Testament and the New, the Roman pride, feudalism, chivalry, dim barbaric memories of Britain, or Norway, or Italy, or wild Teutonic forests,—and how shall we in our generation walk with clear-seeing eyes, assured that we choose wisely in all things? We glow to the quietest heroism of Socrates, Christ, and all the martyrs, but also to the courage of the Lion-Hearted, of Nelson, Washington, Stonewall Jackson, and the rest. We shrink from the word-picture of a modern battle, with its unsparing insistence on the manifold horror of efficiently wrought carnage; we are likewise revolted by the grim vignette of the peaceful room of telephone and telegraph, some fifteen miles or more from the front, where the general and his staff eagerly direct the distant, bloody chess-game; and yet we are atune to the old romances of knighthood and to modern calls of the wild. What man shall analyze his own heart? There are voices within pleading at the same time for war and for peace. The advocacy of the latter is not based solely on Christian brotherly kindness, but with it are tones also of ignoble self-interest and cowardice, while, in behalf of the former, much that is finest in a man may cry, as well as all that is brutal. Christ Himself, in words of brooding sadness, divining the strivings that must later be even as to what men were to believe of Him, announced that He was come, not to send peace, but a sword. And the "working Christian" in this civilization, when Christians

do not as a rule walk the two weary miles along the post-road instead of the one harshly required, or abstain from all legal action, yielding more even than the oppressor asked, or sell all that they have and give to the poor, must not of necessity accuse himself of having denied all Christianity, or having played a hypocrite's part, because, among the wrongs that one nation may do another, he sees some most blackly wrong which call for vengeance, and because he has set amid things admirable and holy the citizen's valiant deed in defense of the national honor.

For our own United States in this grave time, here are quickening words, from Greek poetry again. They come from that comparatively little-known drama of Euripides quoted above, *The Suppliants*, and they are translated by Gilbert Murray. They are spoken to Theseus, the legendary hero of Athens, by his mother:

Thou shalt not suffer it, thou being my child!
Thou hast heard men scorn thy city, call her wild
Of counsel, mad; thou hast seen the fire of morn
Flash from her eyes in answer to their scorn!
Come toil on toil, 'tis this that makes her grand,
Peril on peril! And common states that stand
In caution, twilight cities, dimly wise—
Ye know them; for no light is in their eyes!
Go forth, my son, and help.—My fear is fled
Now. Women in sorrow call thee and men dead.

FLORENCE MARY BENNETT.